

"MORRIS AS WORK-MASTER:" A LECTURE DELIVERED BY W. R. LETHABY AT THE BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL SCHOOL OF ART ON THE 26TH OF OCTOBER, 1901.

LONDON:
JOHN HOGG, 13 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

BIRMINGHAM:
CORNISH BROS., 37 NEW STREET.

COPYRIGHT.]

[PRICE SIXPENCE NET.

521/10 06539

“THE STUDY AND PRACTICE OF ARTISTIC CRAFTS:” AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY W. R. LETHABY. 21 pp. Price 6d. *net.* Published by JOHN HOGG, 13, PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C., and CORNISH BROTHERS, 37, NEW STREET, BIRMINGHAM.

"MORRIS AS WORK-MASTER:" A LECTURE DELIVERED BY W. R. LETHABY AT THE BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL SCHOOL OF ART ON THE 26TH OF OCTOBER, 1901.

(WITH A FRONTISPIECE.)

LONDON:
JOHN HOGG, 13 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.
BIRMINGHAM:
CORNISH BROS., 37 NEW STREET.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016



KING ALFRED.

CARTOON FOR STAINED GLASS BY WILLIAM MORRIS.

“ Morris as Work-master.”

IN speaking of Morris, I hope you may find an attitude of reverence less tiring than an affectation of judicial restraint; that attitude of detachment, which, to make one's estimate of a life look true and unbiassed, sprinkles the telling of it with a due number of unfairnesses. Moreover, it must be said that much of what in England usually passes for art criticism consists in saying, how fine a work would be if it were only quite different from what it is. In this kind of criticism the critic is doing nothing more than measuring his own stature against a standard. Such a critic seems only anxious to define the limitations of his own mind.

In the first part of this paper I give some outline of Morris's art-teaching and life, and end with an attempt at an explanation of some of the ideas and principles exemplified in his works.

“ I was born and bred,” says Morris, in “ News from Nowhere,” “ on the edge of Epping Forest—Walthamstow and Woodford, to wit. A pretty place, a very jolly place. . . . When I was a boy, and for a long time after, except for a piece about Queen Elizabeth's Lodge, and for the part about High Beach, the Forest was almost wholly made up of pollard hornbeams mixed with holly thickets.” Further on in the same book another memory of the scenes of his boyhood is preserved, where, speaking

of the Essex Marshes, he says : " What with the beasts and the men, and the scattered red-tiled roofs, and the big hayricks, it does not make a bad holiday to get a quiet pony and ride about there on a sunny afternoon of autumn, and look over the river and the craft passing up and down, and on to Shooters Hill and the Kentish uplands, and then turn round to the wide green sea of the Essex marsh-land, with the great domed line of the sky, and the sun shining down in one flood of peaceful light."

There must have been much to direct such a genius and feed his spirit in this life at the edge of the forest sixty-five years ago (how remote it seems now !), when he " cut about on his Shetland pony," and explored the forest " yard by yard, from Wanstead to the Theydons, and from Hale End to Fairlop Oak." " When we were children," he said, " every house in the fields was the Fairyland King's house to us." " To this day, when I smell a may-tree I think of going to bed by daylight."

By seven years of age he had read the whole of Scott's novels, which ever remained associated in his mind with a tapestry room of " faded greenery " at Queen Elizabeth's Lodge.

When he was eight years old he saw Canterbury Cathedral and Minster Church, which last, from this visit alone, he always remembered distinctly; indeed, he never saw it again. As a boy of nine, " he rode half Essex over in search of old churches." The sight of these old Essex churches, then unrestored and romantic, bedraggled though most of them were in a comparatively innocent way by churchwardening, had untold consequences on such a mind. The mysterious whispering woods, the pathetic beauty of

the churches, and the spell of Scott's romance, aroused his mind, a dozen years before most of us begin to think, to the wonder of the Middle Ages, to the love of the old monuments, and to the imagining of what the country looked like "then," which he later called his "archæological natural-history side."

After school at Marlborough, Morris went up to Oxford in 1852, and Burne-Jones sat in the same entrance examination. Story has it, that Burne-Jones, sitting at his side, wrote on his Latin paper, under the name William Morris, "His Horace." When he went up Oxford was still largely unspotted by the world of steam civilisation, and such a great work of art, which filled his heart with its beauty, could only be expected to finally confirm a twig so bent. The gradual destruction of this Oxford by the professionally learned ("knowing noodles" he called them) was an injury to history and to modern life which he could never forgive.

Oxford, however, gave him the master friendships of his life, with Burne-Jones and Faulkner and Webb. The great events of his residence at Oxford were the meeting with these men, the reading of Malory, Froissart, Ruskin, and Browning, and the establishing of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine.

Ruskin at once became his acknowledged master, "who," as he said at a later time, "let a flood of daylight into the cloud of sham technical twaddle which was once the whole staple of art criticism." "Ruskin was a man of genius, the author of one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century." It is interesting to record that Ruskin, in conversation a few years ago, guaranteed that "Morris is beaten gold."

It now seems inevitable that Morris's mind should have fixed on the study of architecture. He seems to have taken in the *Builder* journal from the time of going up to Oxford, and his days off were still spent in visiting churches and rubbing brasses. The long vacation of the first year he also devoted to visiting English churches, and in the following year he went to France, and saw Amiens, Beauvais, Chartres, Rouen, and other places. The next year again he was in France with Burne-Jones, and saw, as he exultingly writes, nine cathedrals and twenty-four other great churches. What he thought of Amiens is written in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine. Of Rouen, he, twenty-five years later, recalled "what a wonder of glory that was to me when I first came upon the front of the cathedral rising above the flower market."

At the close of this French journey Burne-Jones and himself resolved not to enter the Church, but to follow Art. In November, 1855, he wrote to his mother as to his determination, and of his new intention of making himself a "decent architect," and how he would, by his change of plan, "by no means give up" his thought of "bettering the world." Even at this moment, however, he was perfectly clear-sighted and curiously unenthusiastic as to any hope for architecture of the old kind in the present day. In this same letter he wrote of Street, "he is a good architect, as things go now, and has a great deal of business."

He entered into articles with Street in January, 1856, but a month or two was time enough to convince him that there was nothing for him in the methods of the office-bred architect, which would

only allow him to come into touch with building at the end of a compass point. The principal work in Street's office, besides the customary church scrapings of a diocesan "practice," was a competition for a church at Lille. Morris, after copying a drawing became restless and began to write poetry, and after about six months of it, and after meeting Rossetti, his mind turned towards painting, as an art with which he might get into more effective contact. Street's office moved to London at this time, and so Morris was once more with Burne-Jones, who had come before, and with him he now shared rooms.

In two or three months more Morris entirely relinquished the profession of an architect, but that which he later called "the noble craft of house building" ever remained in his estimation as first amongst the employments of men.

Twenty years after this time Burne-Jones wrote:—"I think Morris's friendship began everything for me; everything that I afterwards cared for. We were freshmen together at Exeter. When I left Oxford I got to know Rossetti. He is, as you know, the most generous of men to the young. He taught me practically all I ever learned. He gave me courage to commit myself to imagination without shame." In a letter of Rossetti's to Bell-Scott, in June, 1857, he says that "Morris is now painting his first picture, Sir Tristram in the garden of King Mark's Palace recognised by the dog he had given to Iseult from the Morte d'Arthur. It is being done all from Nature, of course, and, I believe, will turn out capitally." About six months later, Rossetti wrote to Madox Brown, "Plint has bought Topsy's picture for £75."

The series of paintings in the Debating Hall at Oxford was now undertaken by a group of volunteers comprising Burne-Jones, Morris, Arthur Hughes and others, with Rossetti as captain. "A more brilliant company" says a recent writer, "it would, out of paradise, be difficult to select."

Rossetti's admiration for his helpers, may be read in his recently published letters. Of Morris, I am told that he often said that he was "the most spontaneous of the lot." When his picture was finished, Morris set to, to paint the ceiling all over with pattern work. This, which was probably an outcome of some studies in illumination made a short time before, was, with that exception, his earliest ornamental work.

This brings us to the year of the building, for himself, of the Red House, Bexley Heath, into which Morris was now to put all his force and to which the whole group contributed so much that it practically became the next stage of action for the brotherhood. A piece of orchard ground was found by Morris, when the trees happened to be in blossom, and was instantly bought. Philip Webb was architect and the others made offerings of the work of their hands. What with Burne-Jones and Rossetti paintings on the walls, doors, and furniture, and Morris's decorations on walls and ceilings, and in glass and embroidery, it became a house of all the talents. Burne-Jones painted the story of Sir Degraunt on the drawing room walls, Morris himself figuring as the hero, Rossetti's meeting of Dante and Beatrice was painted on a door. In May 1860 Rossetti wrote to Brown "The towers of Topsy darken the air," and in January 1862 he wrote to Norton "I wish you

could see the house which Morris (who has money) has built for himself in Kent. It is a most noble work in every way and more a poem than a house, such as anything else could lead you to conceive, but an admirable place to live in too."

The work went forward with infinite frolic and expenditure of practical jokes ; one of which may be told. After Morris had been busy diapering a wall with a motto which he had taken for himself—" If I can," Burne-Jones came while it was yet dawn and added to the legend the words, " but I can't."

The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine had been conducted by what we may call the Morris brotherhood. The decoration of the Oxford Hall was undertaken by two of the members of this brotherhood and two of the old Pre-Raphaelites ; Webb, too, whom Morris had met in Street's office, was now drawn in as interested spectator. The Red House was carried out by practically the same band. After working together so long was the group to break up ? At this very time the Great Exhibition of 1862 was being prepared for, and it seems quite likely that the more strict association to be known as Morris and Co., made in 1861, was entered into under this impetus—it was something to keep them together as a band. The artist members of the firm were Rossetti, Madox-Brown, Morris, Burne-Jones, and Philip Webb.

In the letter of Rossetti to Norton before quoted, dated January, 1862, he goes on to say, " I wish you could see a painted cabinet with the history of St. George, and other furniture of great beauty which we have in hand. We have bespoke space at the Great Exhibition. Our stained glass, at any rate, may

challenge any other firm to approach it. Morris and Webb the architect, are our most active men of business as regards the actual conduct of the concern ; the rest of us are chiefly confining ourselves to contributing designs when called for."

The cabinet here mentioned was painted by Morris himself, it is a long low sideboard-cabinet, having three doors painted with subjects most dramatically imagined from the story of St. George ; the paintings being heightened on the robes and armour with gold and silver. The first panel shows a herald making a proclamation and the princess being led away ; the second shows her bound to a tree, to which is attached a scroll saying she is offered to the dragon, and a second scene shows her rescue ; the third panel depicts the procession back to the rejoicing town, an enormous dragon's head being borne on a pole behind them.

Inside, the cupboards are painted with the fine red known as "dragon's blood," a conceit which Morris must have chuckled over. Painted furniture appears amongst the classes of work named in the first prospectus issued by the firm ; and two or three years before this time Rossetti had painted a big chair, designed by Morris, with a subject from the "Morte D'Arthur" ; but probably the most remarkable of all the pieces so produced was a large upright cabinet, of which the doors were painted by Burne-Jones with subjects from Chaucer's "Prioress's Tale." This was a wedding present to Morris and a contribution to the Red House. Burne-Jones's painted furniture of a later day—the Graham piano and the St. Margaret clavichord—continued the tradition of the painted furniture of Morris and Company. Some work in

stained glass was also done in time for the Great Exhibition ; and for a year or two Morris designed figure work as well as ornament. Some of his figures were of great beauty, although he later spoke of them slightly. One little King Alfred is as bright as an ivory carving, and three female figures designed about this time were afterwards woven into a tapestry.

After this period Morris only arranged the colour and added detailed ornaments to figure subjects designed by Madox Brown and Burne-Jones. An enormous body of work was produced in this way. Embroidery was also one of the arts to which Morris devoted his earliest attention. The room at the Red House in which the painted cupboard stood was covered with coarsely-embroidered cloth hung as tapestry.

We now come to the period of Morris's designs for wall papers and textiles. In the last Arts and Crafts Exhibition the original drawings for many of these were exhibited, together with a selection of the finished products. These patterns stand alongside of his illuminations, his tapestries, and his printing as examples of the high prime of his power.

From first to last he must have made hundreds of such designs ; these have been imitated all over Europe and America, but they stand supreme in modern pattern work, and will necessarily remain supreme until as great a man as Morris again deals with that manner of expression with his *full force* as he did. Morris has told us again and again that pattern, to him, did not mean a mere abstract arrangement in line and colour ; it had to bring into our rooms some reminder of the beauty and freshness of nature, some message from the Earth Mother. Even

the most formal of his works recalls to us the strong growth of healthy vegetation, or the tangle of thickets where birds sing and shy beasts hide. Others, more directly, speak in ordered pattern-language, of a flower-embroidered field; of willow boughs seen against the sky; of intertwined jessamine and white-thorn; of roses climbing against a background of yew; of branching pomegranate, lemon and peach; of a rose-trellised arbour in a garden.

In these patterns the colour, fair and pure, is always simply and effortlessly right. On the one side nothing is mineral or acid, on the other nothing is mawkish or morbid. Some of the patterns are illuminated all over like stained glass; in others, on a quiet background, a fruit or bird's neck glows with colour like a Chinese lantern. Others have a sweet mellowness and vegetable sappiness as if the cloths were stained through and through with the juices of flowers.

Then the drawing is clear, elegant and strong; nothing is loose or vague; and, as in Morris's written work, so here, there is no finesse nor rhetoric of design, but all is quiet, inevitable, and great-minded.

Time compels me to miss any reference to his work in dyeing and weaving of stuffs, and to his most exquisite work in writing and illuminating which occupied him from 1870 to 1880. Carpet and tapestry weaving were to follow in the eighties. The first piece of tapestry on which he apprenticed himself to himself was shown at the last exhibition of Arts and Crafts. To produce this he had to devise a suitable loom, and to dye the wools; then he set it up, and wove a piece all himself, from his own design, mostly before his breakfasts. When

done he may have been proud of it for a time, but he soon hid it away, and it was never publicly shown during his life. Two or three other tapestries were designed by himself, and others in collaboration with Burne-Jones. The series culminated in the lovely "Nativity" of Exeter College, and in the magnificent series of designs after the *Morte d'Arthur*.

The last art which Morris took up to regenerate was the printing of books. He had made some essays in this direction about 1870, but his work in the Kelmscott press occupied the last six years of his life. In himself explaining his aims, he says that he had noticed that fifteenth century books were "always beautiful by force of the mere typography." We all of us know this now as a mere commonplace, but ten years ago the most of us would have passed such books over as merely interesting from the point of view of history; it needed the eye of a master artist like Morris to see that they were intrinsically beautiful—the perfect form of printed book. His intention to deal with printing was fully confirmed by Mr. Emery Walker's lecture at the Arts and Crafts in 1888. A few years later he was to lecture there himself on the same subject, and I well remember how on that occasion while telling us of the perfect form of the old books, he remarked wistfully that he sometimes feared that with the march of science, books might be abolished in favour of some distilled essence of literature carried about in bottles.

With Morris's literature I shall not attempt to deal. Its aim, given in his own words, was "to embody dreams in a series of pictures"; it is the written complement of his designs, as clear, positive and noble

as they. His stories, like the stained glass abbey-windows which he describes in the "Sundering Flood," are "all as if done with gem stones; and everywhere the fair stories told as if they were verily alive; and as if they who did them had seen them going on in the earth and in the heavens."

A large body of his writings, however, deal technically and historically with the arts and crafts. Amongst these, the little "Gothic Architecture" is, I think, the best general account of the meaning of that art which has ever been written.

With all Morris's more technical writings is bound up a philosophy of the relation of art to practical life, and I shall conclude this part of my paper by considering four main doctrines which seem to stand out from the general body of his teaching. The first clause in this gospel for to-day would be on the necessity of reinventing our eyes, and on the immediately consequent need for cleaning England. Nature and Art speak directly to us through the eyes. What they say cannot be strained through other people's intellects and bottled into word-arguments; but they speak languages simple, direct and universal to all who have eyes to see and hearts to love. One of the strangest phenomena of our time is the subjection of our eyes. We ought not to see, *merely* as collecting information, but also to read the essential truths which have access to the spirit directly by the eye, which is chief amongst what the old thinkers called the five gates of the soul. It is interesting to find in the writings of Dürer, whose mode of thought Morris himself spoke of as "Gothic in essence," this assertion: "The sight is the noblest sense of man; a thing thou beholdest is easier of belief than that thou hear-

est." Morris saw that the spirit of man was shaped by its environment of thought-suggesting material, and that of all means of inspiration contact with pure nature was the most necessary. The second proposition is on the value of manual labour in training man. Here again his attitude was the exact opposite of modern ideals or prejudices. We are not to hide away from labour, but gladly to accept it as the best mode for the exercise of energy which is one with life. It is Labour which best gives value to energy, and contentment to rest. "The reward of labour," Morris said, "is life." Education has come to mean, first of all a knowledge of books. In "News from Nowhere," on the contrary, the booky people are rather apologetic, and a book-learned man says of his craftsman-friend, "I know he looks upon me as rather a grinder, and despises me for not being very deft with my hands. From what I have read of nineteenth century literature, it is clear to me that this is a kind of revenge for the stupidity of that day, which despised everybody who *could* use his hands."

Modern education appeared to Morris to be very much of what Herbert Spencer calls a Ceremonial Institution, a thing like a Chinese lady's lame feet or a Mandarin's long nails, which are intended as evidence that rich people have been made expensively useless. Here again Morris returned to the mediæval ideal in which education was not one thing but many, and a Master Weaver and Master Mason and Master Tailor stood much on a par with the Doctor of letters. In days to come when the Guilds shall again resume their office and their power, we shall doubtless have not only Doctors of Law and Medicine, but Doctors of Carpentry, Smithing, and Baking.

The third point, in my rough attempt at summarising Morris's philosophy of art, is the view that the office of art is to redeem labour from being a curse. If labour is not sweetened by art, that is, made interesting by thought and contrivance and pride in good quality, it will brutalize those who deal with it. Not only the dyer's *hand* but the dyer's *soul* is subdued to that he works in. As Ruskin says:—"Life without industry is guilt, industry without art is brutality."

One is now almost afraid of talk of art: the thing has been so parodied, vulgarised and abused; it smells as it were of stuffy rooms, it is limp with foolish trifling, and stodgy with pretence. It was not so when Ruskin and Morris first made use of the word to mean the elements of good quality, reasoned fitness, and pleasantness in all work done by hand for necessary service. Art to Morris was the spirit of man put into the body of his labour; the intrinsically right principle in the making of things—Work religion. Above all, and first of all, art is evidence of seriousness. In his earliest essay on art, that on Ruskin in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, he lays down the principle that the aim of art like the true aim of any other human power was "not to amuse people but to make them brave and just and loving men."

"What I mean by art" he says, in what is probably the most suggestive definition of the word ever attempted, "is some creation of man which appeals to his emotions and his intellect by means of his senses." So far from its being at one with luxury it has always been stifled by luxury. Art is that which harmonises man's work with nature, "the ugly is something degrading to our man-like qualities."

The fourth cardinal point of Morris's teaching may be described as a conscious love of and communion with nature. Every attack on the beauty and purity of nature is an injury to ourselves, for we are not only dependent *on* nature, but a part of it, and we cannot but suffer with her suffering. For the view that nature is to be looked at from outside, and that the earth is a mere convenient backyard for manufacturers, and the refuse heaps of commercialism, we shall have some day to substitute the reverent knowledge that the earth is our larger body, a thing not at all to be exhausted for profit. We shall awaken to the fact that when we have sold our inheritance for so many five pound notes there is nothing left worth buying with the said five pound notes. We must come to know that the world is no more mere mine and midden but a home and a heaven to be lived in and loved.

It was just the ordinary kindly earth, and the old buildings it bears in its lap, which Morris loved with a sort of Druid's passion. Take this description of England:—"The land is a little land; too much shut up within the narrow seas, as it seems, to have much space for swelling into hugeness; there are no great wastes overwhelming in their dreariness, no great solitudes of forests, no terrible untrodden mountain-walls; all is measured, mingled, varied, gliding easily one thing into another; little rivers, little plains, swelling speedily-changing uplands, all beset with handsome orderly trees; little hills, little mountains, netted over with the walls of sheepwalks; all is little; yet not foolish and blank, but serious rather and abundant of meaning for such as choose to seek it. It is neither prison, nor palace, but a decent home."

In trying to draw out some practical points from a survey of Morris's art-life and teaching, I would mention first how his wonderful diversity was founded on intense concentration. His artistic life is divided up into distinct periods during each of which he gave all his force to the study and development of some particular art, as pattern printing, dyeing, carpet and tapestry weaving, illumination, printing and so on. I dare say you remember yourselves how steps in your education, were it the study of mathematics, music, or a language, were made at certain definite periods. The mind's processes, if I may say so, seem like chemical or electrical processes, in which you go on adding drop after drop, or making pass after pass, and all at once something happens: the elements run together or a spark is given off. After such a moment our powers reach another stage; but these moments only come as a result of accumulated force and a certain mental heat. While Morris was perfecting his printing, for instance, in the last half-dozen years of his life, he just lived and dreamt, read and talked, of types, papers, bindings, borders, woodcuts; his very recreation was in collecting fine old examples of typography.

His study was not only of the superficial look of things, but of their very elements and essence. When the firm were first producing textiles, Morris was a practical dyer; when it was tapestry, he wove the first piece with his own hand; when he did illumination, he had to find a special vellum in Rome and have a special gold beaten; when he did printing, he had to explore paper-making, ink-making, type-cutting and other dozen branches of the trade. His ornaments and the treatment of Burne-Jones' illustra-

tions were based on his personal practice as a wood-cutter. Morris was no mere "designer" of type and ornament for books, but probably the most competent master book-maker ever known. Indeed it is a mistake to get into the habit of thinking of him as a designer; he was a work-master—Morris the Maker.

As to his conception of art, he thought of it as an essential language. Just as there is gesture language and speech language, so art, through the eye, like music, through the ear, signals, as it were, by a code of its own, ideas to the mind.

In his lecture "Some hints on pattern design," he defined what he meant by patterning, as "the ornamentation of a surface by work that is not essentially imitative or historical," but yet an "ornamentation that *reminds* us of the earth, animals, and men," and so "sets our minds and memories at work." "You may be sure that any decoration is futile and has fallen into at least the first stage of degradation when it does not remind you of something beyond itself, of something of which it is but a visible symbol." This ornamental pattern-work (he says) "to be raised above the contempt of reasonable men, must possess three qualities: beauty, imagination, and order." Examining these three essentials, the need for beauty is obvious; as for the second, imagination, "every work of man which has beauty must have some meaning in it also; the presence of beauty implies that the mind of the man who made it was lifted above commonplace, and that he had something to communicate to his fellows." Then comes a fine maxim "Every real work of art, even the humblest, is inimitable." Then as to the third of the essential qualities of decorative art—order. This he says is at once a wall

against vagueness and a door for the imagination ; and this must be clear if you come to think of it. Give an artist a piece of paper and say to him "I want a design," and he must ask you "What for?" But if you say, I want you to make such and such a pretty thing out of these intractable materials, straightway his invention will be quickened. It is "this working in materials which is the *raison d'être* of all pattern work. Every different material is the means by which we may tell a story in a new way."

As to construction and drawing, several of his lectures contain invaluable hints. His structure was invariably strong and springing, his drawing crisp and clear. His favourite frameworks for repeating patterns were formed on the branch, the network of square lozenges or curved lozenges and a series of strong scrolls spreading all over the surface. He chose rather the simple and the obvious for ground work, not striving against the rigid bonds of his materials and methods, like those do who squeeze moonlit landscapes into repeating friezes.

On the other hand, he nearly always gave a certain mystery to his ornamental work by the use of underlays of smaller foliage, sub-patternings, or powderings. An appearance of intricacy was one of the effects that he nearly always brought into his patterns.

One of the most striking points to be observed in his work by practical men is the amount of change he could get out of a few elements in a mechanically produced pattern. A single colour, for instance, may be used in a piece of work, sometimes as spaces of colour, sometimes as outline, and again as shading and hatchings and dottings. Every contrivance of this kind was at his fingers' ends and he enjoyed its employ-

ment. A friend once found him spotting the background of a design with dots, and asked why he did not hand that mechanical work over to an assistant. "After taking all the trouble to draw it, do you think I'd be such a fool as not to do the dots?"

Morris's drawing is a wonderful combination of strength and sweetness. His patterns don't look drawn so much as grown. Everything is sharply defined and vividly alive, bright and gay. Vagueness was an artistic sin against which he was always preaching. He seems to have seen the details of his pattern work always as shape, never as outline. This I think is a point to be noted, for from our habit of outlining and then tinting in the areas between the lines a certain strife springs up between the two systems of line and space, and the relations are altered so that what looked right in outline is wrong as arrangement of colour areas. An outline drawn clear and sharp is a thing that should show and be judged on its merits, it does not do as a boundary limiting, yet swallowed up in, the final tone or colour. The proper boundary in such cases is the thing found last, it is the ultimate finish of the form as defined by brush strokes. Morris's pattern work was in the main the painting of shapes with a brush, it was not tinting in the spaces defined by a rigid border. Even when firm black lines following the pattern are an essential part of the design, these are outlines added as a final clearing, sharpening, and defining, and as such they vary in width, and work in with small areas of the defining colour. In the main, then, Morris's pattern work is made up of colour forms designed with the brush, and doing it thus he could modify his shapes right up to the moment of finish,

thickening a branch, adding detail to unfilled spaces and coaxing the edges of his leafage into finally beautiful forms. Only in this way, I believe, can harmony of scale, flow of form, and that look of just rightness be obtained. In the past, of course, this was the way in which most decorative work was done. Letters were shapes written with a broad pen, or like the Lombard capitals formed by the stroke of a brush, and the relation of thicks to thins was not *designed*, it made itself. The strength of old heraldry is partly to be explained in this way. The charges were colour-shapes, not outline drawings tinted. In stained glass this is even more marked, and all good painted pottery decoration you will find has developed under the brush stroke. Our modern pattern work fails very largely in this, that it is made up of pencil outlined shapes copied into colour areas.

To give a special instance, I have watched Mr. Morris designing the black and white borders for his books. He would have two saucers, one of Indian ink the other of Chinese white. Then making the slightest indications of the main stems, of the pattern he had in his mind, with pencil, he would begin at once his finished final ornament by covering a length of ground with one brush and painting the pattern with the other. If a part did not satisfy him the other brush covered it up again, and again he set to to put in his finished ornament. This procedure opens up another idea of his, that a given piece of work was best done once for all, and that all making of elaborate cartoons, and then accurately copying into a clean finished drawing was a mistake. There was not only a loss of vitality which would come by the interposition of more or less mechanical work, but a drawing would

not come right a second time, and would always to his eye bear the impress of a copy instead of a thing self-springing under his hand. It is difficult to realise the extent to which he felt this, but in his written work it was exactly the same. He seemed to have the idea that a harmonious piece of work needed to be the result of one flow of mind; like a bronze casting in which all kinds of patching and adding are blemishes. If in a lecture for instance he went over old ground, he rarely re-edited by alterations and interpolations; but just wrote the whole thing over again from his head and his heart. The actual drawing with the brush was an agreeable sensation to him, the forms were led along and bent over and rounded at the edges with definite pleasure, they were *stroked* into place as it were with a sensation like that of smoothing a cat. Just the true painter's gusto in fact: and thus he kept alive every part of the work by growing the pattern as I have said, bit by bit, solving the turns and twists as he came to them. It was to express this sensuous pleasure that he used to say that all good designing work was felt in the stomach.

In coming to speak of Morris's colour, I suppose, if I would pass for a critic, I ought to say that it was better or worse than his sense of form, but I don't really know, his form and his colour are both so far beyond me that I can only admire and try to learn. Even in the choice of single colours, reds, greens, yellows, Morris's mastery appears; if it be kermes and indigo in dyes, or red lead and yellow ochre in pigments, he looked on these colours when *pure* as in themselves beautiful natural products, the individuality and flavour of which would be destroyed by too much mixing. As the flavours of wine differ from

one another, and as these would only be destroyed by mixing sherry and port, hock and the rest, so the natural perfection of pigments is more and more lost as you mix them. You may reinforce colours by skilful juxtaposition, but mixing is almost certain to be degradation. The ideal of practical colouring is to apply the pure pigment at once in its right place, without even too much stirring with the brush: of course this is not generally possible, but all mixing, and all laying wash over wash, tends to lower colour to mere dirt. A false idea of harmony there is, which is very dangerous—the harmonising colour into a general frowsy drab, the harmony of kamptulicon. A nice story is told of Morris and of how a customer who had got hold of him objected to the brightness of colour in his things. “I like this, Mr. Morris, but I fear the colour is too bright for my room.” “This, too, is delightful, but I wish the colour were more harmonious.” At last Morris opened the street door and said, “If it’s mud you want you will find plenty out there.”

Although some of the most beautiful colour in the world is low in tone, little more sometimes than variously tinted greys like the hues of a pearl, yet after all colour *is colour*, and not its negation, and to learn the possibilities of delicate gradations it is necessary to have explored the possibilities of colours at their central brightness.

Preconceived notions of there being specially “art colours,” like peacock green or terra cotta red, are ruinous to the acquisition of a colour sense. Beware, too, Morris said in a Birmingham lecture, of aiming too much at iridescence: “It is apt to look like decomposition.” The best way of developing a sense

of colour would probably be to deal with a very limited number of simple pure old-fashioned pigments—a yellow, a red and a blue, with black, grey and white, and then to experiment by laying pure patches of each beside each in various relations of quantity and intensity. The most casual examination of Morris's work shows his use of simple, pure hues, his relief of dense colour by light tints, and his opposition of grey to hot and brilliant colour. But to attempt to describe the arrangements of colour made by him would almost be as elusive a task as to describe the scent of flowers. It was his aim so to play on the keyboard of colour as to get harmonies true and pure as when bells chime perfectly together.

THE ARTISTIC CRAFTS SERIES OF TECHNICAL HANDBOOKS EDITED BY W. R. LETHABY.

No. I. BOOKBINDING, AND THE CARE OF BOOKS. A TEXT-BOOK FOR BOOKBINDERS AND LIBRARIANS. BY DOUGLAS COCKERELL. With 122 Diagrams and Illustrations by Noel Rooke, and 8 Collotype Reproductions of Bindings.

NOW READY. 342 Pages. Price 5s. net.

"An excellent book opens 'The Artistic Crafts Series of Technical Handbooks.'"—*Times*.

"It would be hard to find any technical book of this kind which gives more importance to considerations of good taste than this. . . . It leaves no part of its subject unaccounted for. . . . Valuable in itself, it promises well for the series which it opens."—*Scotsman*.

THE FOLLOWING ARE IN ACTIVE PREPARATION:

GOLD AND SILVERSMITHS' WORK.

By Mr. H. Wilson.

CABINET MAKING AND DESIGNING.

By Mr. C. Spooner.

WRITING AND ILLUMINATING.

By Mr. E. Johnston.

WITH OTHERS IN DUE COURSE.

PUBLISHED BY JOHN HOGG,
13 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.

